

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 3CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
28 May 1986**NATIONAL**

Theories persist on KAL 007 shootdown

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Washington

In the early morning hours of Aug. 31, 1983, a Korean Air Lines jumbo jet with 269 people aboard was shot down by a Soviet fighter pilot over the Sea of Japan.

The plane, on its way from Anchorage, Alaska, to Seoul, had flown for nearly two hours off course through highly strategic sections of Soviet airspace. All on board were killed in the attack.

How the commercial airliner got where it did remains to this day one of the great unsolved mysteries of world civil aviation disasters. Two and a half years after the shootdown, the search for answers continues.

Armed with crackling and fuzzy tape recordings of in-flight communications, photocopies of route plans, transcripts of Soviet fighter pilots in hot pursuit, and other documents, a cadre of authors, journalists, free-lance investigators, and family members of those killed on the plane are working to uncover the untold story of the final flight of KAL 007.

Theories abound. But some crucial facts appear to have sunk with the wreckage of the plane.

"It is the perfect crime," says a congressional intelligence committee staff member. All the witnesses were killed, and the single largest piece of evidence — the plane itself — has never been recovered. Likewise, the plane's flight data and voice recorders have never been found — at least not by the United States.

Three recent events have brought the fatal flight back into the news:

- On May 7, a federal judge in Washington, D.C., dismissed all claims filed against the United States government by family members of those killed on the flight. (A suit against Korean Air Lines is pending.) In dismissing the claims, Judge Aubrey E. Robinson stated: "The record is clear that the government breached no duty to the passengers of KAL 007."

- On May 12, investigators with a watch-dog group, The Fund for Constitutional Government, announced at a press conference that they had accumulated "evidence" suggesting that KAL 007's off-course flight was planned by US intelligence agencies interested in monitoring the Soviet radar response to a large unidentified intruder. They also charged that the US government is covering up its role in the incident.

- A new book has just gone on sale in US bookstores

discussing various conspiracy theories about the Korean Air Lines flight. The book, "Shootdown," by R. W. Johnson of Oxford University, cites "an enormous accumulation of circumstantial evidence" supporting the "hypothesis" that the plane was on a US surveillance mission. Johnson admits in the book, however, that he has discovered no "smoking gun" proving that an intelligence mission ever took place or was ever planned.

Nonetheless, he speculates: "If the surveillance hypothesis were indeed to be proved true . . . the scandal and denouement which such a scenario would present would be far, far greater than Watergate."

Two other books on the subject are expected to be published late this summer. One, by Yale graduate student David Pearson, also argues that KAL 007 was apparently on an intelligence mission.

The other, by investigative reporter Seymour M. Hersh, maintains that KAL 007 was not on an intelligence mission and that the US government has not attempted to cover up alleged illicit involvement in the affair, according to Robert Loomis of Random House, the book's publisher. Mr. Loomis stressed that these two questions are not the focus of Mr. Hersh's book.

"What [Hersh's book] deals with is why the plane was off course, why the Russians argued among themselves about what was going on, and what American intelligence knew about what was going on and how soon," Loomis says.

Hersh characterizes his book, "The Target is Destroyed," as an empirical work, focusing on verifiable facts rather than possible theories about the tragedy. "It will answer every question except why the plane did what it did," he says.

Just as conspiracy theorists found fertile ground in the aftermath of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the unanswered questions surrounding KAL 007 have given rise to a large body of literature and to heated debate about whether the plane was on a surveillance mission or whether US intelligence officers could have warned the pilot and prevented the shootdown.

Senior Reagan administration officials have repeatedly stated that the US played no role in the incident and learned of it only after the tragedy had occurred. They stress that it was the Soviets who pulled the trigger and shot the plane down.

Nonetheless, the incident has prompted scores of detailed magazine articles, been the subject of at least eight books, and has given rise to its own newsletter, "The KAL 007 Information Bulletin and Newsletter."

In addition, the unanswered questions have been a continuing source of pain for the Americans, Koreans, Japanese, and others whose relatives and family members were killed on the flight.

Some of them are convinced that their wives, children, parents, and others were sacrificed by US intelligence officials intent on monitoring the Soviet's air-defense radar response to the wayward jumbo jet.

"Questions, questions, and more questions," laments

Paul McNiff, whose brother, Kevin, was on the flight.

Mr. McNiff says he had hoped after the shootdown that Congress would "turn over every stone and find the truth from tragedy." But he adds, "I was wrong."

The US government — including Congress — has never conducted a formal public investigation. It was never felt to be necessary.

According to a recently retired military officer who was serving in the Pentagon at the time of the incident and had access to classified US investigation reports, there was no evidence to suggest US involvement in the disaster or that contradicted the US government's public statements about the tragedy.

"What would be the point of risking the lives of 269 people just to see how the Soviets would respond to one airplane?" the former military officer asks. He notes that three times a year the Soviets conduct mock air attacks against their own air-defense systems. US intelligence monitors those exercises closely and they facilitate a detailed analysis of Soviet air-defense capabilities in the North Pacific far in excess of anything that could have resulted from the flight of KAL 007, the officer adds.

The US government has stood by the International Civil Aviation Organization's 1983 findings that the Korean Air Lines pilots must have flown into Soviet air space by mistake and were apparently unaware that they had strayed 360 miles off course. The deviation may have been caused by a programming error in the plane's computerized navigation system, the report says.

But author Pearson disagrees. "There is an abundance of evidence that suggests that Captain Chun [the pilot of the flight] knew what he was doing, and that the US was aware of where Flight 007 was going and the Soviet air-defense flap that it was causing."

He adds, "I think it absolutely cries out for an open inquiry."

John Keppel, an investigator for the The Fund for Constitutional Government, which has supported some of Pearson's research, is also calling for a full congressional investigation of the tragedy.